Sirhan Said Shaken By Own Past

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — The harrowing details of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's assassination have failed to shake Sirhan Bishara Sirhan in the recounting. But last week the young Jordanian Arab exploded in anger when his own background and emotions were exposed at his first degree murder trial.

Testimony that tends to cast Sirhan in a bad light personally seems to make him react as though from pressure on an aching tooth.

The trial resumes Monday after a weekend recess with defense strategy put to question by Sirhan's tantrums. At the close of last week's session, in the absence of the jury, he vainly demanded the right to plead guilty and ask for the gas chamber.

"I killed Robert Kennedy wilfully, premediatatively, with 20 years of malice aforethought," Sirhan told Superior Court Judge Herbert V. Walker, who threatened to have the defendant trussed and muted if his interruptions continued.

It was 20 years ago, the defense claims, that Sirhan, then 4, was exposed to the horrors of warfare between Zionists and Palestinian Arabs in the old walled city of his native Jerusalem. Out of this, the defense says, grew Sirhan's strong pro-Arab feelings, which eventually clashed with what he regarded as Kennedy's pro-Israeli stand.

The defense contends Sirhan's mental and emotional instability made it impossible for him to have planned the June 5, 1968 slaying of Kennedy, who was campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination.

What triggered Sirhan's most violent outburst to date was defense testimony that he was only an average student in school, with an IQ of 89, slightly below normal.

Defense attorney Grant Cooper regards the 5-feet-3 defendant as a man of fierce personal pride, unable to let the world see him as anything but an heroic figure. Cooper attributes to Sirhan the Oriental preoccupation with "face."

Sirhan first grew agitated in court when the state introduced excerpts from notebooks he kept in advance of the assassination.